

H. B. Gilliland, 1911 - 1965

An Appreciation.

Hamish Boyd Gilliland was born on 2nd October 1911 in Southern Rhodesia, educated at George Watson's College, Edinburgh, and read Botany and Zoology in the University of Edinburgh, for the degree of B.Sc. In due course he read for an honours degree under Professor Sir William Wright Smith, Regius Professor and Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden. His interests were both taxonomic and ecological. Later he studied at the British Museum (Nat. Hist.), where he improved his knowledge of systematic botany and generally prepared himself for a career in southern Africa. Persons who helped and influenced Gilliland at this stage were John Ramsbottom, then Keeper of the Botanical Department at the Museum, and George Taylor. For these he always had special niches in his heart and in his mind.

In the course of field studies in Southern Rhodesia, supported by a Beit Scholarship, Gilliland visited the University of the Witwatersrand in 1934, when his obvious interest and ability in taxonomy and field ecology led to his being invited to serve on the staff of the Department of Botany, then under the administration of Professor John Phillips.

In June, 1935 Gilliland took up his appointment and in a remarkably short time proved himself an excellent lecturer and demonstrator, a keen guide to post-graduate students and an indefatigable investigator. Because of the emphasis then laid upon both taxonomy and pure and applied ecology in the Department, he was able to make important contributions to these subjects before the onset of war in 1940.

Shortly before the war he published an important contribution to the ecology of Manicaland, Rhodesia (*Journal of South African Botany*, 1938) based upon his studies as a Beit Research Scholar.

Volunteering to serve in the South African Forces as a private, Gilliland in a short time proved his competence as a soldier and in due course was commissioned. He served in East and North Africa and, during the course of the campaign, was gazetted by the Military Administration to study various ecological and related matters in British Somaliland. His co-worker for a time was one of the Department's and also Gilliland's own earlier students, P. E. Glover, later to become known for his ecological researches in East Africa.

Gilliland's own studies in North-east Africa provided information which he admirably worked up after the war for a thesis for the degree of D.Sc., which was awarded by the University of the Witwatersrand in 1947. Abstracts from this thesis were published in the *Journal of Ecology* in 1952.

On his return from active service Gilliland enthusiastically supported his Professor in the educating and training of large special classes of ex-servicemen being prepared for careers in conservation and veld and pasture management and in other aspects of applied ecology.

In 1948 the Head of his Department was invited to undertake advisory work abroad and for several years Gilliland served as Acting Head — a duty which he fulfilled with ability.

Throughout his career in South Africa Gilliland showed himself to be a capable, keen and pleasant colleague, a friendly and able guide to students and one who was interested in and prepared to work for the general good of the University and of his adopted country, South Africa. Many a student during the periods 1935–1940 and 1945–1955 was generously and ably helped toward a career in pure or applied botany.

Although by nature reserved, Gilliland ever showed to those he worked with a kindliness, a warmth and a generosity of spirit. He was always objective, no matter how great the subjectivity of some of those with whom he inevitably had contact at various times. Critical of all that was ethically unworthy and scientifically slipshod, he was the first to encourage sincere effort no matter how faltering this might be. For these and other qualities his name and influence will remain cherished by a large number of people in South Africa and Rhodesia.

Gilliland came to Singapore in September, 1955 as the second holder of the Chair of Botany in the young University of Malaya. He had a staff of three lecturers and some temporary assistance and very cramped quarters and inadequate equipment. The department in that year had through its hand some 37–40 science and medical students. The air was heady with political change, and expansion was the order of the day. By the end of 1964, the department had grown in stature to 6 lecturers and 220 students, in quarters, though very greatly expanded, which still were barely adequate. The path was far from smooth, and within a couple of years of his arrival Gilliland was faced with the necessity of establishing a new and separately equipped and staffed department at the new Kuala Lumpur Division of the University of Malaya. He had in fact two departments of botany on his hands 240 miles apart, one established and inadequately provided for, the other with nothing, but the promise of money and the prospect of a very large number of students. In 1959, when the Department of Botany at Kuala Lumpur opened its doors he had to operate both departments with staff commuting to and fro between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. This difficult situation was resolved in part by three of his lecturers and certain subordinate staff from Singapore opting to transfer permanently to Kuala Lumpur. In 1960 the department in Kuala Lumpur became separate under its own professor, and in the 1961/62 session the two divisions of the University of Malaya split, that in Kuala Lumpur retaining the University name, while that in Singapore, where Gilliland remained, became the University of Singapore.

These staffing problems were a challenge to Gilliland, and even though after 1960 he had responsibilities only towards the Singapore department, it was a no easy matter to engage adequate competent staff. While promising graduates of the university were the obvious source for future staffing, there was still the hiatus to be bridged between their going overseas for higher degrees and their return. Amongst the families of British Service personnel stationed in Singapore, there has always been an immensely varied talent, and Gilliland made providential temporary use of dependents with university training in botany to help out. Visiting research workers and Ph.D. students from overseas were also called upon till adequate teaching staff could be recruited from local and expatriate sources. It was not in fact till 1962 that the Department was functioning with a full complement of staff.

Singapore has an unusually good health record amongst tropical cities, but the climate can be trying, and after some five years in Singapore Gilliland began to suffer from an asthmatic condition. This placed great physical strain on him which made field work especially arduous. Nevertheless he accepted this as no excuse for lightening his load of duties, neither towards his students and teaching, nor towards his own botanical interests. From May, 1960 till mid 1964 he was Dean of Science, and for two occasions in the latter half of 1964, he was Acting Vice-Chancellor during a particularly difficult period for the University administration which he handled with shrewd competence, charm and tact.

Though heavily preoccupied with administrative duties, his botanical interest in ecology and secondary vegetation was diligently followed. The observations of earlier workers on Singapore's secondary vegetation were used as a basis for succession studies, which, if these areas survive untouched, will make an interesting starting point for future ecologists to record the final stages of transition to climax forest. His special botanical interest was in grasses, an interest which he brought from his earlier days in South Africa. Shortly prior to his departure from Singapore he completed the text of 'Grasses of Malaya' which has been accepted for publication as Volume 3 of the revised *Flora of Malaya*. He was also keenly interested in conservation and served as a trustee on the Singapore Nature Reserves Board for 5½ years between 1955 and 1961. He sought to bring out the educational aspects of conservation so that the common citizen with no special training in biology, as well as biology students, might learn to understand and appreciate natural history.

In 1964 he was taken seriously ill with a pneumo-thorax and had to spend some time in hospital. For many months before this he had accepted the fact that to regain full health he would have to move to a drier climate, and it was mixed feelings that he left Singapore on 3rd February, 1965 for South Africa where he

took up an appointment at the Botany Department of the University of Natal at Pietermaritzburg. First indications were hopeful: his health appeared to improve; he liked the department: he liked his colleagues, and he enjoyed the stimulating change of students.

Soon after his arrival in Pietermaritzburg, he made an 800 mile car journey to Johannesburg and back to attend his son's graduation at Witwatersrand University. The effort of this, the sudden change to a high elevation climate, and the lack of his physical reserves of strength brought on a relapse of pneumo-thorax and shortly after he had an attack of pneumonia which brought his life to an end on 23rd June, 1965 at the age of 54 years.

Known as Gilly to a wide circle of friends, Hamish Boyd Gilliland and his wife Rita, will long be remembered in Singapore. Their university flat was an open house for students, and often there would be a group come in for a social gathering to meet some eminent biologist travelling through Singapore, or simply to have a get-together. Gilliland was an active Rotarian and was a founder member of the Rotary Club of Singapore-West. He was dedicated to the cause of international co-operation, goodwill and service.

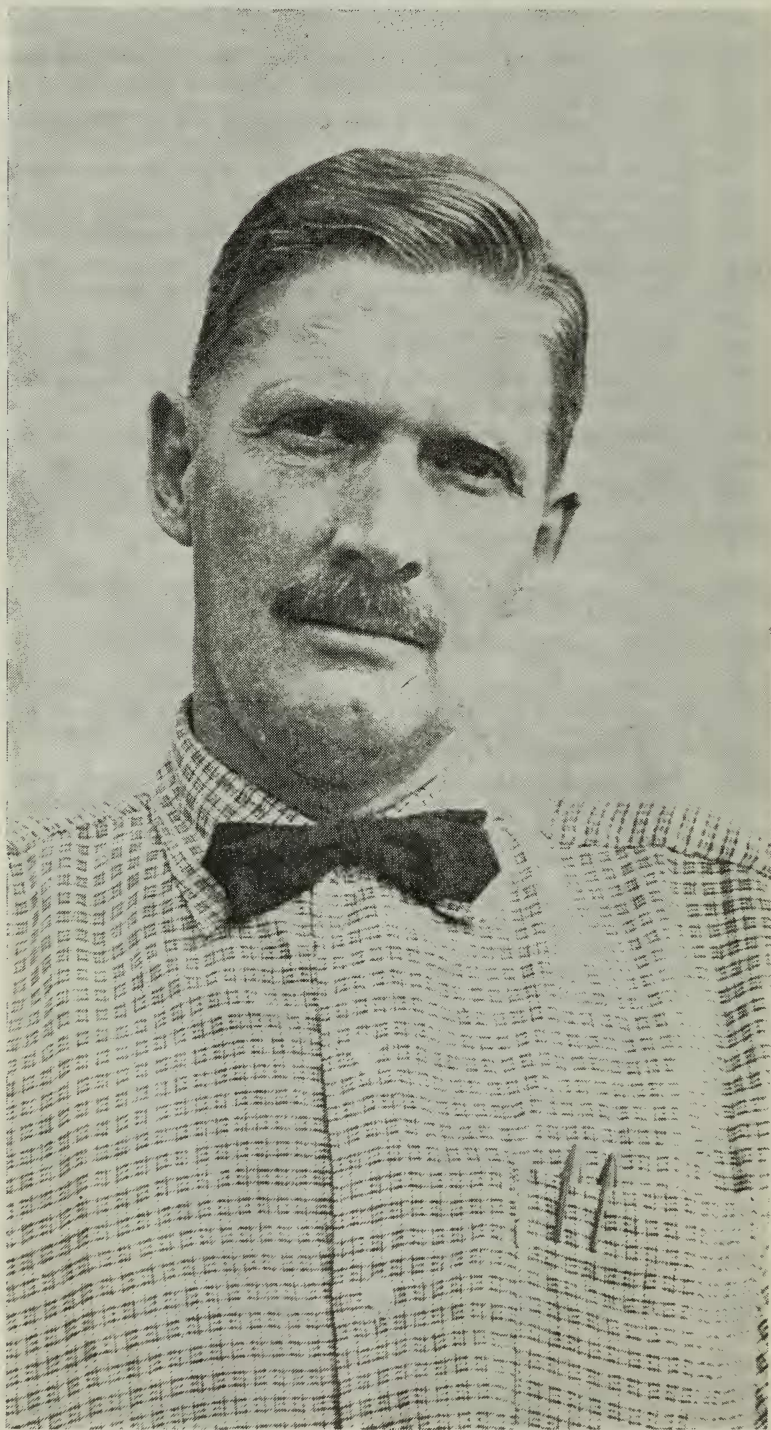
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H. B. GILLILAND

2nd October 1911 — 23rd June 1965.



Taken on 2nd February 1965,
the day before he left Singapore.

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